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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8902
INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 001606

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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/11/2018
TAGS: PREL PGOV MARR AF UK
SUBJECT: DESPITE GRIM MILESTONE, HMG VOWS TO STAY THE COURSE IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: LONDON SIPRNET DAILY JUNE 9

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Maura Connally for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. UK media gave extensive coverage to the killing of three paratroopers by a suicide bomber as they were conducting a routine foot patrol in Helmand province on June 8. The incident pushed the total number of soldiers killed over the seven years of British military presence in Afghanistan to 100. PM Brown and other members of the Government, including leaders of the main opposition parties, paid tribute to the fallen soldiers. Public statements by politicians and private assurances from the FCO, MOD and parliamentary officials indicate continuing cross party support for the UK's role in Afghanistan, at current military levels and with an increasing focus and allocation of resources to the civilian-reconstruction sector. End Summary.

Continued Military Commitment

¶2. (C) FCO Head of Afghanistan Group Matthew Lodge confirmed that as far as the FCO and MOD were concerned, UK force levels would remain at approximately 8,000 personnel for the foreseeable future. While it was unlikely that there would be any significant increase to that number, the UK was determined to do all it could within that framework, including making available additional civilian resources to the PRT and DfID stabilization programs. The UK announcement at the June 12 Paris Afghanistan Compact meeting will provide a more detailed indication of British intentions on the civilian component of its effort.

¶3. (C) Lodge said that it was the UK's intention to coordinate more formally and regularly, at appropriate levels, with the U.S. government as the American role in the south increases, and in the run-up to the 2010 RC/S U.S. command. He said that this process would start with a high-level inter-departmental (to include FCO, MOD, DfID) visit to Washington in July (exact dates TBC).

Opposition on Board, but...

¶4. (C) In response to the recent military deaths and overall toll of 100 killed in Afghanistan, Conservative Party Leader David Cameron said "We owe so much to young servicemen and women who risk their lives on our behalf," and Shadow Defense Secretary Liam Fox said "We should be grateful as a country for the courage and fortitude of those willing to defend the security and values of an often ungrateful nation." Shadow Foreign Office Minister Keith Simpson confirmed to poloff that the Conservative party's support for the UK's efforts in Afghanistan remains steadfast. He said that his party would like to see more coordination among government ministries as well as among coalition partners,

and bemoaned the lack of an overall HMG strategy on Afghanistan, which he attributed to his view that PM Brown is "repelled" at dealing with hard security, as opposed to economic and development, issues.

¶5. (C) Simpson said that in order to retain public support for a UK role in Afghanistan, it would be critical to provide a detailed explanation of the UK's goals and associated costs. He also returned to a long-standing Conservative Party criticism of the Labour government, which is that it does not do enough to care for its soldiers, both on the battlefield and when they return home. Simpson said that improvement of conditions for military personnel and their families would help bolster public support for the Afghanistan deployment. He did not specify how this government (or a future Conservative government) would pay for such improvements.

¶6. (C) At an Embassy sponsored lunch on the day the bad news from Afghanistan was published, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg underlined his party's support for the UK's efforts in Afghanistan. He echoed Simpson's call for a clearer message directed at the public, and cited specifically the need to separate in the public's perception the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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